

Vietnam War

In the Vietnam War—which lasted from the mid-1950s until 1975—the United States and the southern-based Republic of Vietnam (RVN) opposed the southern-based revolutionary movement known as the VIET CONG and its sponsor, the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the DRV, or North Vietnam). The war was the second of two major conflicts that spread throughout Indochina, with Vietnam its focal point (see VIETNAM). The First Indochina War was a struggle between Vietnamese nationalists and the French colonial regime aided by the United States. In the second war, the United States replaced France as the major contender against northern-based Communists and southern insurgents. Communist victory in 1975 had profound ramifications for the United States; it was not only a setback to the containment of communism in Asia but a shock to American self-confidence.

THE ORIGINS OF THE WAR

French Indochina, which included Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, was occupied by Japanese forces during World War II. Vietnamese Communist leader HO CHI MINH and his VIET MINH movement organized resistance against the Japanese and in 1945 declared Vietnam an independent republic. Fearing Ho's Communism, the United States supported the restoration of French rule. When fighting erupted between France and the Viet Minh in 1947, the Americans aided the French and backed the French-sponsored government of Emperor BAO DAI. By 1953 they were providing 80 percent of the cost of France's war effort.

The Partition of Vietnam

In 1954 the French, hoping to win a decisive victory, lured the Viet Minh into a set-piece battle at DIEN BIEN PHU, but were in turn besieged there. During the siege the exhausted government placed Indochina on the agenda of an international conference at Geneva (see GENEVA CONFERENCES). Defeat at Dien Bien Phu made France decide to withdraw from Indochina.

The conference terms were a mixed victory for the Viet Minh. Although it held significant areas south of the 17th parallel, Ho Chi Minh's Communist allies, the USSR and China, pressured him into accepting temporary division of Vietnam along that line, pending elections to be held in two years. Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam were granted independence, and no foreign troops were to be stationed there. In an exchange of population, thousands of northern Vietnamese Roman Catholics moved south, while Communists moved north. Neither the United States nor the South, now led by the U.S.-backed NGO DINH DIEM in Saigon, signed the accords.

Even before the conference's conclusion, Washington, whose policy was to oppose the spread of communism, began planning a regional security pact. The result was the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which provided for future U.S. intervention in the event of danger to South Vietnam; the Indochinese states did not join.

The Two Republics

Providing economic and military aid, the United States supported Diem's refusal to hold the pledged elections, apparently assuming the popular nationalist Ho would win. After a shaky start, Diem began working to destroy the remaining Communist infrastructure in the South. His military force, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), was advised by some 700 Americans, who replaced the French in 1956. Modeled after the U.S. Army, ARVN was trained in conventional warfare, but its leadership was selected from those loyal to Diem. Economic gains were uneven: the small urban sector benefited, but rural areas did not. Increasingly dictatorial, the Catholic Diem incurred growing opposition from the Buddhist majority. Less than 5 percent of the land was redistributed through land reforms, and many peasants who had gained land under Viet Minh rule now lost it.

In the North, the DRV developed as a Communist state with ties to China and the USSR. Harsh land reforms, in which thousands of landlords died, led to the collectivization of agriculture. Although primarily agricultural, the state did experience industrial growth. Under Ho's direction, Vietnamese communism developed independently of Soviet and Chinese models.

EARLY STAGES OF THE FIGHTING

Armed resistance to Diem was organized by former Viet Minh who became known as Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists). Supplemented by cadres that had moved north after 1954 and returned a few years later, the Viet Cong organized in 1960 as the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF). Communist-led and directed by

Hanoi, it included all groups opposed to the Diem regime and its U.S. ally.

The NLF adopted the "people's war" strategy favored by Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung: guerrillas using the civilian population as cover engaged in protracted warfare, avoiding conflict except in advantageous circumstances. Men and supplies infiltrated through Laos and Cambodia along a network of trails named for Ho Chi Minh. The Viet Cong used assassinations, terrorist activity, and military action against government-controlled villages. Diem moved peasants into "strategic hamlets" to separate them from the guerrillas. Peasant resentment at this policy aided Viet Cong recruitment, as did replacement of elected village officials with Diem appointees.

U.S. intervention was based on belief in the "domino theory"—which held that if one Southeast Asian country were allowed to fall under Communist control, others would follow like a row of dominoes—and by an increasing concern for the credibility of U.S. opposition to communism after the Castro government came to power in Cuba (1959). Responding to Diem's request for help, U.S. president John F. Kennedy gradually increased the number of U.S. advisors to more than 16,000.

In Laos, the PATHET LAO guerrilla movement grew following a U.S.-sponsored right-wing coup against the neutralist regime. Kennedy accepted (1962) a Laotian settlement that brought temporary neutralization, but South Vietnam posed a more intractable problem. Introduction of helicopters and more advisors briefly boosted morale in Saigon, but ARVN lost the battle of Ap Bac in January 1963 despite advice and superior technology.

The Fall of Diem

The South Vietnamese situation became critical by mid-1963. Buddhist monks protesting religious persecution dramatized their case by immolating themselves in the Saigon streets; they attracted worldwide attention. Diem refused to placate the Buddhists, however. Frustrated and fearing the war would be lost, the United States supported a military coup that overthrew Diem on Nov. 1, 1963.

Instability marked by a series of coups in the next two years provided continued weakness for the Communists to exploit. Hanoi decided to escalate the violence and increased its strength in the South to 35-40 main force battalions of the People's Liberation Army (PLAF), in addition to some 35,000 guerrillas and 80,000 irregulars. Whereas individual members of the DRV's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) had infiltrated south for some time, the first complete tactical unit arrived in December, moving along the newly completed Ho Chi Minh Trail. Most forces fighting in the South continued, however, to be locally recruited; they were outnumbered by the ARVN, but guerrilla strategy was not predicated on superior numbers. Increasing Soviet as well as Chinese aid fueled the resistance.

The Tonkin Gulf Resolution

In Washington, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, moved rapidly to oppose the insurgents. He authorized the CIA, using mercenaries and U.S. Army Special Forces, to conduct covert diversionary raids on the northern coast, while the U.S. Navy, in a related operation, ran electronic intelligence missions in the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson appointed General William WESTMORELAND to head the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), increased the number of advisors to 23,000, and expanded economic assistance. Warning Hanoi that continued support for the revolution would prompt heavy reprisals, the administration began planning bombing raids on the North.

An incident in the Gulf of Tonkin served to justify escalation of the U.S. effort. On Aug. 2, 1964, an American destroyer in international waters involved in electronic espionage was attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Unharméd, it was joined by a second destroyer and on August 4 the ships claimed that both had been attacked. Evidence of the second attack was weak at best (and was later found to be erroneous), but Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes and went before Congress to urge support for the TONKIN GULF RESOLUTION, a virtual blank check to the executive to conduct retaliatory military operations. There were only two dissenting votes.

After a Viet Cong attack (February 1965) on U.S. Army barracks in Pleiku, the United States commenced Operation Rolling Thunder, a restricted but massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Protection of air bases then provided the rationale for introduction of 50,000 U.S. ground combat forces, which were soon increased. The American public, however, was not told when their mission and tactics changed from static defense to search-and-destroy, nor was it asked to bear the war's cost through higher taxes. Desiring both "guns and butter," Johnson dissimulated, ultimately producing a backlash that full public and congressional debate at this point might have avoided. The public never fully supported a war whose purposes were deliberately obscure.

U.S. ESCALATION OF THE WAR

The decision to escalate slowly, to bomb selected military targets while avoiding excessive civilian casualties, and to fight a war of attrition in order to avoid possible confrontations with the USSR and China seriously misjudged the nature of the enemy and the strategy of people's war. Attrition's only measure of success was a body count of the enemy dead, but Hanoi was prepared to suffer enormous casualties in a prolonged war. Because the DRV fought a total war with a totally mobilized society, it could sustain high losses yet continue infiltrating as many as 7,000 men a month virtually indefinitely. Political cadres won support from, or at least neutralized, the Southern peasantry. Weak in air power, the Viet Cong fought from tunnels and retreated to sanctuaries in Cambodia when threatened. They made mines and booby traps from unexploded U.S. ordnance and relied on ambush and sabotage of the vulnerable and increasingly extensive U.S. bases. Their intelligence penetrated the top levels of the RVN. They set the level of action, and could slip away at will.

U.S. attrition strategy depended on inflicting increasing pain through massive firepower against the North and Viet Cong-held areas until the revolutionaries found the cost too high. Territory gained was "cleared," but not held, because although ARVN, U.S., and allied forces outnumbered the enemy, the United States lacked the enormous numbers occupation would have required. In addition to bombing, the Americans and their allies—who ultimately included 70,000 South Koreans, Thais, Australians, and New Zealanders as well as 1,500,000 South Vietnamese—relied on the latest military technology, including napalm, white phosphorus, and defoliants, in an effort to hold down casualties. Agent Orange and other chemicals cleared vast areas of jungle, depriving the Viet Cong of cover as well as rice. Worldwide outcry over the use of chemical warfare and concern about its effect on the health of civilians and U.S. personnel led to discontinuance of defoliation in 1971.

In addition to conflict on the ground, water, and in the air, there was the struggle for what President Kennedy had termed the "hearts and minds" of the people. The Americans attempted to "search out and destroy" the enemy, leaving rural pacification to the poorly motivated ARVN, increasingly composed of urban elements that had little sympathy with the millions of refugees who were the by-product of the intensive bombing and defoliation. "Strategic hamlets" gave way to "revolutionary development," but the military junta headed by NGUYEN VAN THIEU, who took power in 1967, was unable to devise a successful pacification strategy. Ultimately, it resorted to Operation Phoenix, begun in 1967 to neutralize the Viet Cong infrastructure through arrests, imprisonment, and assassination. Phoenix was advised by a CIA-supported U.S. program.

As the war escalated, Johnson relied increasingly on selective service for manpower. The draft hit American youth unequally. Although student deferments ended with increasing troop call-ups, thousands of middle- and upper-class youth avoided service through a variety of stratagems, obtaining deferments that ultimately placed the heaviest burdens of combat on America's poor and minority groups. Draftees never constituted more than 40 percent of troop strength, but their use increased opposition to the war.

The Antiwar Movement

Opposition to the war grew with increased U.S. involvement. Leftist college students, members of traditional pacifist religious groups, long-time peace activists, and citizens of all ages opposed the conflict. Some were motivated by fear of being drafted, others out of commitment, some just joined the crowd, and a small minority became revolutionaries who favored a victory by Ho Chi Minh and a radical restructuring of U.S. society. College campuses became focal points for rallies and "teach-ins"—lengthy series of speeches attacking the war. Marches on Washington began in 1965 and continued sporadically, peaking in 1968 and again in 1971. Suspecting that the peace movement was infiltrated by Communists, President Johnson ordered the FBI to investigate and the CIA to conduct an illegal domestic infiltration, but they proved only that the radicalism was homegrown.

Although the antiwar movement was frequently associated with the young, support for the war was actually highest in the age group 20-29. The effectiveness of the movement is still debated. It clearly boosted North Vietnamese morale; Hanoi watched it closely and believed that ultimately America's spirit would fall victim to attrition, but the Communists were prepared to resist indefinitely anyway. The movement probably played a role in convincing Lyndon Johnson not to run for reelection in 1968, and an even larger role in the subsequent victory of Richard Nixon over the Democrat Hubert Humphrey. It may ultimately have helped set the parameters for the conflict and prevented an even wider war. Certainly its presence was an indication of the increasingly divisive effects of the war on U.S. society.

The Tet Offensive

By late 1967 the war was stalemated. Johnson urged Westmoreland to help convince a public growing more restive that the United States was winning. Although he promised "light at the end of the tunnel," increasing casualties as well as growing disbelief in public pronouncements—the "credibility gap"—fostered increasing skepticism. U.S. strategy was clearly not producing victory, and Johnson began a limited reassessment.

Meanwhile, Hanoi began planning a new offensive that involved a series of actions: first, intensified activity in the border areas including a massive attack against the base at Khe Sanh to attract ARVN and U.S. forces, followed by attacks on most provincial capitals and Saigon itself. If these were successful, regular forces poised on the outskirts of the cities would move to support a general uprising. The initial actions did draw forces away from the cities, and U.S. attention became riveted on the siege of Khe Sanh.

Attacks on cities began on Tet, the lunar holiday, Jan. 30, 1968. Hitting most provincial and district capitals and major cities, the Viet Cong also carried out a bold attack on the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The attack failed, but the attempt shocked U.S. public opinion. The Tet offensive continued for three weeks. Although they failed in their military objectives, the revolutionaries won a spectacular propaganda victory. While captured documents had indicated that the Viet Cong were planning a major offensive, its size, length, and scope were misjudged, and the Tet Offensive, as it was publicized in the U.S. media, seemed to confirm fears that the war was unwinnable. The public opposed the war in direct proportion to U.S. casualties, and these had topped a thousand dead a month. Tet appeared as a defeat, despite official pronouncements to the contrary. The media's negative assessment proved more convincing than Washington's statements of victory because it confirmed the sense of frustration that most Americans shared over the conflict.

The Significance of Tet

The Tet offensive was a major turning point in the war. Although the Communists lost 40,000 men, they had proved their ability to strike even in supposedly secure cities. Viet Cong, who had surfaced in anticipation of a general uprising that did not come, were decimated in the fighting or destroyed later by police, and from this point the insurgency was increasingly fought by the PAVN.

Johnson ordered a study of the Vietnam situation when Westmoreland requested 206,000 additional troops. An inquiry by Defense Secretary Clark Clifford led to the rejection of the request. However, 20,000 more troops were sent in the next three months, bringing U.S. troop strength to a peak of 549,000. At the same time, the South was urged to do more in its own defense.

Tet crystallized public dissatisfaction with the war. That the public turned against the war solely because of media coverage is doubtful; the number of "hawks" who wanted stronger action probably equaled the "doves" favoring peace, but the public as a whole clearly disapproved of the lack of progress. Further evidence of this came in March, when the antiwar senator Eugene McCarthy, running against the president, won 42 percent of the vote in New Hampshire's primary election.

On March 31, Johnson restricted bombing above the 20th parallel, paving the way for negotiations, and withdrew from a reelection bid. With Johnson's withdrawal and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, the Democratic nomination went to Vice-President Humphrey, who supported the war; the Republicans nominated Richard Nixon.

Communists believed in "fighting and talking"—which the United States now adopted as well. Negotiations began in May but quickly stalled over Hanoi's demands for a total bombing halt and NLF representation at the bargaining table. In November Johnson agreed to these terms. This aided Humphrey's campaign, but Nixon was victorious.

The Tet offensive demonstrated that the GVN was able to act in its own defense, yet the generally weak ARVN performance led to increasing demands for its reform. Johnson determined that primary responsibility for combat in the South henceforth should be born by ARVN. This policy—known as Vietnamization—meant pressuring the Thieu regime into a huge military buildup; the draft age was lowered to 18 and widespread evasion curtailed. Vietnamization did not curb inflation, however, and Thieu's rivalry with the flamboyant vice-premier Nguyen Cao Ky fractionalized the government. Increasing suppression of dissent brought protest from Buddhists and students, but opposition was severely punished under the martial law declared at Tet.

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION AND VIETNAM

During the election campaign Nixon made vague promises to end the war. He was determined, however, to

maintain credibility, preserve Thieu, and defeat the Communists. He and his foreign policy advisor Henry Kissinger downplayed bilateral negotiations and turned to great power diplomacy. They conceptualized a strategy of DETENTE, which involved harmonizing relations with the Soviets through trade and an arms-limitation agreement while encouraging Moscow to abandon Hanoi. Normalizing relations with China would create a "China card" that could be played against the Soviets if they demurred. They hoped that this linkage of diplomacy could produce "peace with honor" in Vietnam and allow a face-saving U.S. departure. The Soviets, however, recognized the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) formed by the NLF in June 1969.

No progress was made in the peace talks, either. The NLF and the North Vietnamese were unwilling to make concessions, and the South Vietnamese were basically opposed to negotiation. Neither side wished to lose on the diplomatic front what it thought could be gained on the battlefield.

The Vietnamization process continued: daily combat operations were turned over to the South Vietnamese, who received the latest U.S. technology and support, and bombing raids were conducted against Communist bases in Cambodia. ARVN remained poorly motivated and relatively ineffectual in combat, but its assumption of the brunt of the fighting reduced U.S. casualties and enabled the United States to begin troop withdrawals.

At home, new administration sought to lessen opposition by substituting a lottery system for selective service. President Nixon called on the "silent majority" of Americans to support his diplomatic efforts for an "honorable peace," but by the spring of 1970 public opinion was two to one against the war. When the public learned of the massacre of more than 300 civilians in the hamlet of MY LAI by U.S. troops, it reinforced beliefs that the war was a brutal, dehumanizing, and pointless affair from which the United States should withdraw.

Incursions into Cambodia and Laos

Nixon disliked confining the conflict to Vietnam instead of striking at Communist sanctuaries and supply points in neighboring neutral countries. Cambodia soon provided him the opportunity. In April 1970 a coup toppled the neutralist regime of Prince NORODOM SIHANOUK, who was replaced by the pro-U.S. LON NOL. Sihanouk had tried to preserve Cambodian neutrality by quietly accepting North Vietnamese infiltration and use of sanctuaries as well as U.S. bombing, but Lon Nol announced plans to interdict movement of Communist troops. When Hanoi then increased its pressure on Cambodia, U.S. forces were sent across the border. They were withdrawn again by June 30, but bombing raids continued until the end of the war.

The Cambodian incursion triggered protests in the United States. At Kent State and Jackson State universities, six students were killed in confrontations with police and National Guardsmen. One hundred thousand marched on Washington. Congress also protested, symbolically terminating the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Criticism abated when U.S. troops were pulled out of Cambodia, but patience with the conflict was wearing thin. Deficit financing of the war brought uncontrolled inflation, which further soured the nation on the war.

Infiltration persisted despite the Cambodian incursion. Seeking to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail, ARVN forces invaded Laos in February 1971. But intelligence provided by Communist agents within ARVN enabled the North Vietnamese to prepare a trap. The operation, intended as an example of the success of Vietnamization, escaped disaster only through U.S. air support. ARVN's casualty rate was estimated at as high as 50 percent. The campaign may have delayed a new Communist offensive, but three months later, party leaders began planning another one for the spring of 1972.

Effects of the War on U.S. Troops

Withdrawals dropped troop strength to 175,000 by the end of 1971, exacerbating effects on troop morale even as it dampened protest at home. No one wanted to be the last American to die in a war the country considered a mistake. Drug and alcohol abuse became widespread among U.S. servicemen, and morale plummeted. Search-and-destroy operations became "search-and-avoid," and officers who gave unpopular orders that exposed their troops to what they considered unacceptable risks became targets for "fraggings"—attempted murder, often by grenade. Racial conflict grew as black soldiers, stimulated by the civil rights and black power movements, increasingly resented fighting a "white man's war." Declining morale was not limited to Vietnam. The military capabilities of the army worldwide declined, and the navy and air force also suffered. Veterans of Vietnam formed their own antiwar organization.

The Easter Offensive

Heavy losses in Laos delayed a new Communist offensive, but the failure of negotiations in 1971 led to a renewed attempt at a military solution. In March 1972, Hanoi launched a major conventional invasion of the South. Its aims were to demonstrate the failure of Vietnamization, to reverse ARVN successes in the Mekong delta, and to affect U.S. morale in a presidential election year. The VC/NVA forces encountered initial success, routing ARVN troops and overrunning Quang Tri province.

The United States anticipated the spring offensive but underestimated its size and scope; U.S. forces numbered only 95,000, of whom 6,000 were combat ready. President Nixon retaliated with an intensified bombing campaign, providing air support to areas under attack in the South and striking fuel depots in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. He also informed Hanoi indirectly that he would allow Northern troops to remain in the South if they made peace before the election. When the DRV rejected this offer Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor, a naval blockade of the North, and massive sustained bombing attacks. The DRV began to evacuate Hanoi, to build a pipeline from the Chinese border, and to develop means to neutralize mines. U.S. planes bombed the Red River dikes, but damage was mitigated by constant repairs and unusually low rainfall.

Ultimately, U.S. bombing enabled ARVN to halt the offensive. The DRV won territory in the South, but its casualties from the air war were heavy. The bombing did not stop infiltration and materiel from reaching the DRV from China and the USSR. Even in victory, ARVN showed continued vulnerability: its desertion rates reached the highest levels of the war.

Negotiating and Fighting, 1971-72

Negotiations throughout 1971 made only limited progress. Kissinger offered to withdraw all U.S. troops within seven months after American POWs had been exchanged but would not abandon the Thieu regime. Meanwhile, playing on the Sino-Soviet split, the United States moved to normalize trade with China; Nixon and Kissinger both visited Peking, after which Nixon traveled to Moscow in May 1972. While improving relations with the United States, both China and the USSR nonetheless increased aid to Hanoi, in order not to be seen as abandoning their ally.

Only after the Easter Offensive did negotiations become a top priority. In three weeks of intensive negotiations in late September and October, Kissinger and North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho shaped an agreement withdrawing U.S. troops, returning POWs, and providing for a political settlement through establishment of a tripartite council of reconciliation. Thieu, however, rejected it because it permitted Viet Cong forces to remain in place in the South, and Nixon supported him. Angered by this turn of events, the North Vietnamese released the history and text of the negotiations.

The Christmas Bombing and the Paris Peace Accords

Nixon, reelected by a huge majority in November 1972, then ordered massive bombing north of the 20th parallel. For 12 days beginning December 18, B-52s rained bombs on Hanoi and Haiphong. Women and children were evacuated and the cities defended with Russian-made surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). Fifteen B-52s were downed, 44 pilots captured, some 1,600 civilians killed, and Bach Mai hospital destroyed. More than 36,000 tons of bombs were dropped, exceeding the total for the entire 1969-71 period.

After the bombing, both sides were ready to resume negotiations: Hanoi had been seriously damaged and its stock of SAMs exhausted, while in Washington an angry Congress discussed limitations on the war. Six days of intense negotiations produced an agreement only slightly different from the October terms. Thieu was ignored. Nixon informed him that further resistance would lead to termination of U.S. aid, whereas compliance would guarantee the return of U.S. air power in case of Communist violations. Thieu refused to sign the agreement but did not actively oppose it.

The Paris Accords, signed Jan. 31, 1973, brought U.S. withdrawal and the return of the POWs but little else. Only a few civilian advisors and military personnel would remain. The Thieu government was left intact, but PAVN troops retained positions in the South. Political issues were left to negotiations between the two Vietnamese governments. A temporary four-party Joint Military Commission was to prevent a resumption of hostilities, and a four-power (Canada, Poland, Hungary, and Indonesia) International Commission of Control and Supervision was to supervise the cease-fire. The Americans agreed to aid postwar reconstruction of the DRV, a bargaining ploy the North took seriously. The accords were a "peace with honor" only by very generous interpretation: they left unresolved the major issue of the war—the question of who would govern the South.

THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

The RVN and the DRV used the time before implementation of the peace to seize more land, and Washington sent massive amounts of aid to Thieu. Both sides quickly violated the accords. The last POWs were returned in March, but the United States halted talks with Hanoi about reconstruction aid, charging that the DRV had not ceased infiltrating troops to the South. The United States continued to bomb Cambodia and resumed reconnaissance flights over the DRV. Nixon intended to pressure China and the USSR to compel Hanoi to respect the accords and to resume B-52 flights if necessary, for he was still determined to win.

In the spring of 1973, however, Nixon's position was weakened by the involvement of his administration in the Watergate scandal. Taking advantage of this, Congress approved an amendment requiring the cessation of military operations in and over Indochina by August 15. In November 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Act, requiring the president to inform Congress within 48 hours of deployment of U.S. military forces abroad, withdrawing them within 60 days in the absence of explicit congressional endorsement. This virtually guaranteed the end of U.S. involvement in Indochina.

Both sides prepared for further war. The DRV stationed SAM missiles in areas it held in the South and turned the Ho Chi Minh Trail into an all-weather highway. Guided by the Defense Advisory Office, successor to MACV, Saigon planned new action modeled on the U.S. method of warfare, which favored the expenditure of material and use of massive firepower rather than men. Renewed fighting led Thieu to declare the start of a third Indochina War in January, confident that the United States would come to his aid. Although ARVN instituted new action, the North and the PRG won increasing victories.

By the fall of 1974 the initiative had passed to the revolution. U.S. aid fell from \$2.56 billion in 1973 to \$907 million in 1974 and \$700 million in 1975, as Congress abandoned Vietnam for more pressing priorities elsewhere. Diminished aid hurt the RVN, but equally damaging was a 90-percent inflation rate, massive unemployment in the wake of the U.S. pullout, and increasing corruption. ARVN, bolstered by pretruce aid, looked impressive on paper, but its morale was worse than ever without U.S. air support and spare parts for U.S. equipment. Recruitment to the PRG increased in rural areas while a "third force" favoring peace developed in the cities. Thieu remained convinced that Nixon would not abandon him, but the Watergate crisis forced the latter to resign in August 1974.

In January 1975, Hanoi commenced a two-year campaign it believed necessary to defeat the South. Unexpected victory in the Central Highlands caused a speedup in the timetable. The ARVN retreat from the Highlands turned into a rout that became a disaster: troops fled south toward Saigon, anxious to protect their families. The loss of six central Vietnamese provinces led to the fall of the cities of Hue and Danang. Capitalizing on these victories, Hanoi embarked on a campaign to "liberate" Saigon. Unmoved by news of ARVN's collapse, Congress rejected President Gerald Ford's request for \$300 million in supplemental aid, appropriating funds later only for humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of Americans. The rejection of the supplemental aid bill and the fall of the last resisting outpost, Xuan Loc, forced Thieu to recognize the gravity of the situation; he resigned and fled the country. Duong Van Minh became president, only to surrender unconditionally to the North on April 30.

While the world watched the dramatic evacuation of the Americans and some of their supporters from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, the other countries of Indochina fell less dramatically. Cambodia's KHMER ROUGE took Phnom Penh on April 17 and immediately evacuated the city, beginning a reign of terror that lasted for three years. The Pathet Lao had already gained participation in a coalition government in February 1973, and it took control of Laos peacefully after South Vietnam fell.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE WAR

Debate over the loss of Indochina was minimal, but the attempt to find "lessons" in the defeat engaged the United States for the next decade. The domino theory was proved invalid, as no further nations in Southeast Asia adopted Communism. Isolationist in the wake of war, the United States eschewed further interventions, and even limited covert operations, until Ronald Reagan became president in 1981. Inflation caused by the war costs racked the U.S. economy for the next eight years, and the social wounds of the divisive war were slow to heal. Frustrated and angry in defeat, America at first rejected its veterans as symbols of defeat in a war generally agreed to have been a mistake.

The war's statistics were grim: 2 to 3 million Indochinese killed, 58,000 Americans dead, the expenditure of three times the amount of U.S. bombs dropped on both theaters during World War II; overwhelming devastation in Indochina. The war cost the United States over \$150 billion. The Viet Cong had proved willing to take one of the highest casualty rates in proportion to population in history. That the United States never lost a major battle proved

irrelevant; concentrating on military objectives, it vastly underestimated the political struggle, the nature of the enemy, and the consequences of supporting weak and unpopular regimes in the South.

By 1982 the wounds had begun to heal. The dedication of the VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL in Washington, D.C., brought the veterans belated recognition for their sacrifices. The nation, recovering from its own posttraumatic shock, began embarking on new interventions against Communism. The legacy embodied in the slogan "No More Vietnams" still had power, however, as opposition to these actions showed.

Vietnam was formally reunified in 1976, and Northerners quickly established dominance over the remnants of the PRG-NLF. The long-feared bloodbath did not occur, but some 200,000 supporters of the former regime were removed to "reeducation" camps, where between 7,000 and 10,000 remained in 1986. Collectivization did not bring prosperity: the per-capita income was only \$130 in 1985. The Vietnamese proved more able soldiers than managers. The move to socialize the economy hurt many, but it especially harmed the large Chinese entrepreneurial minority in the South, whose position was further weakened when China attacked Vietnam in 1978. More than 1.4 million Vietnamese, including large numbers of ethnic Chinese, fled the country by sea; as many as 50,000 of these "boat people" may have perished in flight. Nearly a million settled abroad, including some 725,000 in the United States.

Cambodia was ruled by the despotic POL POT regime after the war. It murdered or starved some 1.5 million of its 7.5 million people and harassed its neighbor, leading the Vietnamese to invade in late 1978. Vietnam installed the HENG SAMRIN regime and retained an army of occupation. As a result of this violation of the UN charter, the United Nations ceased development aid, and many Western countries followed suit, ceasing or sharply curtailing assistance. This led Vietnam to rely even more heavily on its ally the USSR, which had leased the port facilities at Cam Ranh Bay. The occupation of Cambodia and the fate of some 2,500 Americans missing in action (MIAs) posed barriers to recognition by the United States. In an effort to win U.S. recognition, most Vietnamese forces were withdrawn from Cambodia by the end of 1989; Vietnam also agreed to cooperate in a resolution of the MIA issue. After the collapse of the Soviet Union late in 1991, Vietnam intensified its efforts to normalize relations with the United States, China, and the other nations of Southeast Asia. In October 1992, hoping to end the U. S. trade embargo imposed in 1975, it agreed to open its war museums and military archives to U.S. government inspectors.

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